



**BRIEFING: NOVEMBER 17, 2015 BOARD MEETING AGENDA ITEM #3**

**TO:** Chairman Richard and Board Members

**FROM:** Diana Gomez, Central Valley Regional Director  
Mark McLoughlin, Director of Environmental Services

**DATE:** November 17, 2015

**RE:** Merced to Fresno Central Valley Wye Project Update

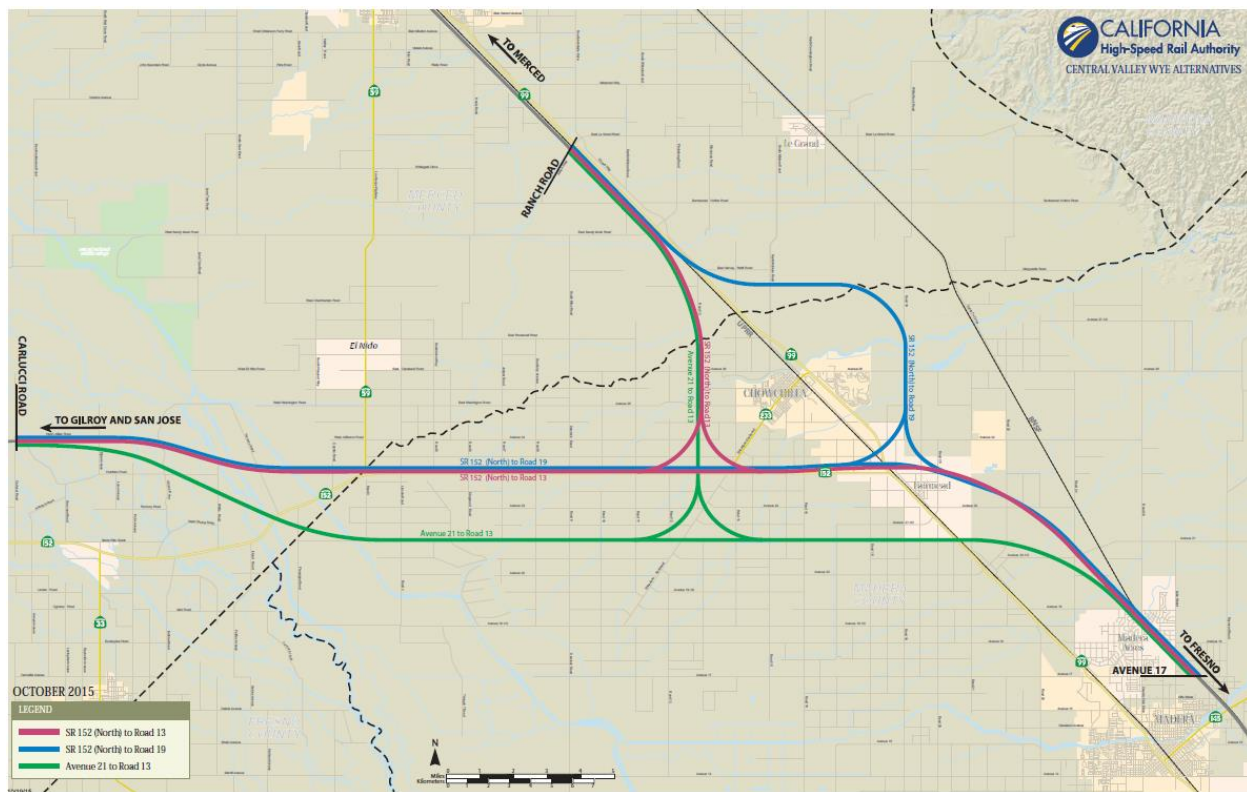
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**Background**

The California High-Speed Rail Authority (Authority) continues to evaluate three alternatives as part of preparation of a draft supplemental environmental document for the Merced to Fresno (MF) section (supplemental to 2012 MF Final Environmental Impact Report/Environmental Impact Statement), focused on the Central Valley Wye area. This draft supplemental document will be completed and released in 2016 for public and agency review. It is anticipated that prior to its release, Authority staff will identify a preferred among the three alternatives for Board concurrence so that such a preferred alternative can be noted in the draft supplemental document to aid public and agency review of the document.

At the last Board update in May 2013, four alternatives were being evaluated. Since that time, staff has been engaged in an extensive, in-depth outreach and consultation program in order to support the development of the supplemental environmental document. Authority staff have been working with the City of Chowchilla, the community of Fairmead, Madera and Merced Counties, as well as with local residents, stakeholders, and regulatory agencies to refine the alternatives. As a result of this engagement, the four alternatives were refined to three. Specifically, the SR 152 South to Road 18 alternative was withdrawn based on community and agency preference for SR 152 North. In addition, the SR 152 North to Road 18 alternative was shifted to Road 19 to provide greater distance from the Greenhills community and to reduce impacts to agricultural operations along the Road 18 corridor. As a result, the three alternatives that will be evaluated in the Merced to Fresno Central Valley Wye supplemental environmental document are as follows (and pictured below):

- SR 152 (North) to Road 13 Wye
- SR 152 (North) to Road 19 Wye
- Avenue 21 to Road 13 Wye



Based on the Authority's experience throughout the state, and lessons learned from CP 1, a series of project refinements have been incorporated into the remaining alternatives:

- The width of the project footprint has been adjusted to account for utility location easements, buffers for important farmland, acquisition of uneconomic property remainders, maintenance access, and combined access to high-speed rail systems sites and isolated properties where feasible.
- Revised agency criteria have been evaluated and incorporated.
- Cost savings from Value Engineering exercises have been included, and the updated capital cost estimates reflect efficiencies realized in CP 1.
- Additional refinements have been incorporated based on the Authority's outreach efforts and are noted in the section below.

Further staff analysis and engagement with stakeholders will inform the Authority as staff identifies a preferred alternative for submission to applicable regulatory agencies for concurrence. The recommendation of a preferred alternative will be the subject of a future Board item, likely prior to release of the draft environmental document, which is anticipated in Spring 2016. The preferred alternative will also be submitted to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and Environmental Protection Agency for their concurrence that it is likely to be the preliminary Least Environmentally Damaging Practicable Alternative as defined in Section 404(b)(1) of the Clean Water Act. None of these actions are final; Board and agency approval of any alternative (preferred or otherwise) would only occur after completion of the draft and final environmental documents and associated public input.

## **Stakeholder Meetings and Outreach**

The Authority has maintained an extensive and ongoing community engagement process. In January 2015, two public information meetings were held in Chowchilla and Fairmead. Since then, staff has continued to meet with a variety of stakeholders, including the Merced and Madera Farm Bureaus, Preserve Our Heritage, Chowchilla Water District, local school districts, irrigation districts, elected officials, businesses and property owners, and the general public. The input gathered through these engagement efforts has helped inform refinements to the three alternatives and identify potential proposed mitigation measures. As noted, this includes shifting from Road 18 to Road 19. It also includes modifications to proposed grade separations along SR 152 North as well as the local roadway network to address community input about more highly traveled roadways and to reduce impacts to local circulation.

## **Next Steps**

Below is a general outline of the next steps to occur in the process of evaluating and eventually approving a Wye alternative for construction and operation. Please note that many of these steps are not sequential, but rather overlap.

1. Staff to gather additional agency and community input on the three alternatives and potential mitigation measures (through Winter 2015/2016)
2. Staff to recommend a preferred alternative to designate in the draft supplemental environmental document for Board consideration and concurrence, and subject to regulatory agency concurrence (Winter 2015/2016)
3. Staff to circulate the draft supplemental environmental document for public and agency review and comment, including comment on the preferred alternative; conduct public meeting(s) to receive public comment (Spring/Summer 2016)
4. Board to confirm the preferred alternative (Summer 2016)
5. Staff to confer with U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and seek/obtain concurrence on the Preliminary Least Environmentally Damaging Practicable Alternative (LEDPA) (Fall 2016)
6. Staff to prepare (Fall 2016) and circulate (2017) a final supplemental environmental document
7. Board and FRA approval of final supplemental environmental document and a wye alternative alignment for construction (2017)

## **Attachment**

- Map: Merced to Fresno Central Valley Wye Alternatives